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Life in a Global Village and Principles on Tolerance: the Role and Value of Marshall McLuhan's Legacy

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Abstract

The article discusses theoretical approaches to media and media culture introduced by the famous Canadian researcher Marshall McLuhan. The authors present modern studies examining the main principles of the well-known media researcher in the context of interrelations with such concepts as media reality, media communication, media education, globalization and tolerance. Special significance in the article is given to process analysis of creating media realism, its functioning in social settings and influence on perception, consciousness and behavior of a modern man living in the digital world whose all life aspects are inevitably connected with the media. The heritage of M. McLuhan had a significant impact on media education development. The flow of media information is constantly growing: there emerge new television channels, periodicals, Internet sites. The influence of mass media on an individual acquires an increasingly professional character: modern media affect people's lifestyle, attitudes and values, culture of tolerance.

Keywords: Marshall McLuhan, media communication, tolerance, media culture, media education, globalization.

1. Introduction

The contemporary society is frequently called informational. The emergence of new mass media has enabled us to correlate and interconnect different types of human activity separated by space and time. The information field of the media which has become "a real habitat – a space that is as real and apparently unclosed as the globe was five hundred years ago" (Savchuk, 2008) is able to form diametrically opposed social, moral, artistic, intellectual values and interests. In this regard, there are a lot of points of view concerning the essence of media. Thus, media are considered to be both a source of knowledge and at the same time a hindrance in education and upbringing, a means of comprehensive development and a factor hindering the latter, etc. In this regard, the problem of people's existence and coexistence based on principles of peace, non-violence and tolerance takes the first place.

Media and media culture that used to be intermediaries for information transmission have become a sociocultural environment and a living space for people under current conditions. A.V. Kostina believes that modern mass culture "acts as a means of realizing identification and adaptation strategies rather than hedonic and recreational ones thus securing the social hierarchy existing in society through symbolically significant cultural consumption and contributing to the

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stabilization of the social system through the construction of a special virtual superstructure over reality” (Kostina, 2006: 18).

Hence, the ever-increasing information flow and life of a modern person both in the real and virtual worlds have actualized the issues of tolerance in the digital era.

2. Materials and methods

The research materials include publications written by the famous philosopher and sociologist Marshall McLuhan as well as scientific works by culture experts, philosophers, sociologists, art historians who researched the issues of human existence in the world of media and media culture (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2019; Petranová et al., 2017). The study uses historical and philosophical methods, comparison, synthesis and classification.

3. Discussion

Today’s readers, viewers, users of media production of varied quality are becoming media consumers or, as they are often called, communicants who act as a substitute for “Hollywood replicant in the system of “real” relationships”. Being an actual form of intersubjectivity, communicants “are inseparable from communication means as the Minotaur is inseparable from the maze and the Centaur is from the productive imagination power. They create the environment in the same way as the media environment creates communicants” (Savchuk, 2008: 27).

Unfortunately, the situation is such that today not a single structure is able to resist this onslaught or compensate for its negative impact: neither education nor cultural institutions are able to compete with the media reality. The media generation has to reflect on the question: what place is allotted to a person in the media reality who, in fact, designed it.

Reality (from Latin *realis* – real) is “an available, limited and definite entity in the form of things (objects, qualities, discrete individuals)” (MDP, 1996: 299). The complexity and inconsistency of media reality both as a product and a media environment are associated with transformation processes influenced by economic, socio-cultural and many other factors. In this regard, the phenomenon of media reality is nowadays a subject matter of cultural studies, philology, psychology, pedagogy, theory of communication, history, philosophy, political science, sociology and other sciences. A.F. Zotov emphasizes that “a new concept of reality characteristic of modern science is one of the most fundamental and essential innovations in the philosophy of the 20th century” (Zotov, 2005: 173).

Development of electronic means of communication globalized world processes at the macro-meso- and micro-levels. A global political arena and a world market were formed; multinational corporations emerged, etc. People got access to information from all over the world. In the Western society, globalization led to social relations decentralization, destruction of distinct national borders, and formation of the so-called network society. M. McLuhan paid great attention to contemporary mass culture which served as a starting point for him to analyze specific features of mass media, to create a general concept of media (Chumakova, 2015).

The Canadian philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) is recognized as one of the brightest researchers in the problem of media, media reality in the philosophy of the 20th century. He was one of the first to come up with the idea that economic intercourse and communications in the modern context are increasingly taking the form of information and knowledge exchange, and accordingly, the media (such as vehicles, banknotes, advertisements, electricity, photography, weapons and etc.) have an impact on people’s worldviews and lifestyle. According to M. McLuhan, different means of communication develop in parallel with cultural and social processes thus defining the human perception. Therefore, communication is both a means of understanding social processes and at the same time a way to ensure the integrity of society. When developing, mass media become a means of “expanding” a person – his feelings, abilities, capabilities, etc.

Gradually gaining power over people, the media are able to keep the emotional climate of society under control. The scientist argued that “changing media technologies entails changing and developing culture. Moreover, M. McLuhan predicted that it would be possible to control the “emotional climate” of entire cultures with the help of media” (Fedorov et al., 2007: 17). The result of this process is the so-called “amputation” of human consciousness: “We no longer feel the same way as before, and our eyes, ears and other senses are no longer the same” (McLuhan, 2005: 59). Each stage in the development of civilization, according to M. McLuhan, defines a picture of the

world, and its construction is closely related to information processes in society: the first one refers to the primitive pre-alphabet culture which is characterized by oral transmission of information. This stage coincides with the image of the collective picture of the world; the second stage of the written-print culture is accompanied by a change in the collective perception of the world by the individual. This stage is associated with the emergence and development of an industrial social structure; the third one is the audio-visual culture.

4. Results

According to M. McLuhan's theory, any shift in the history of mass media is accompanied by compliance with the laws according to which each communication medium goes through several stages: 1) acceleration: a communication medium or technology has a sign or a symbol of magnifying, amplifying or improving sound speed of solving problems, etc.; 2) obsolescence: each new means of communication replaces the previously existing one; 3) synthesis: the communication tool returns the lost one at a new level; 4) extraction: after reaching the limits of its development a means of communication is capable of completely changing its character.

Associating each epoch with the emergence and adaptation of new ratios of human feelings, M. McLuhan noted that "a true revolution consists in a later and longer-term adjustment, a kind of "fitting" of personal and social life to a new model of perception generated by the development of technology" (McLuhan, 2005: 56). Accordingly, the perception of the world at each stage of the civilization development has its own characteristics and imposes an imprint on the social structure: "almost any technology reveals a tendency to change the human environment ... The technological environment should not be viewed as a kind of a passive "container" of people; on the contrary, it (the environment) is constituted by active processes that change both humanity and technologies created by it" (McLuhan, 2005: 19). For example, the written and printed culture corresponds to linear and consistent perception, switching from hearing (characteristic of the pre-literary culture stage) to vision, isolation of visual ability from all other senses (McLuhan, 2005: 20).

Typography has become a "new reality" of the Middle Ages. The invention of the printing press opened an era of completely new technologies, had a significant impact on the development of economic, social and political infrastructure of industrial society. S.G. Kara-Murza notes: "Due to typography the oral language of personal relationships was challenged by obtaining information through a book. ... It was a turning point. A new school was also built on the mass book" (Kara-Murza, 2005: 7). The invention of the press contributed to the development of science, economy and culture. With the advent of the book culture, the essence of human perception has changed significantly – from oral and auditory perception to visual. Getting into the world of the alphabet and letters, a person plunges into a special reality that is far from the world of nature and the oral culture. M. McLuhan believed that the 17th century marked the emergence of a new world of the unconscious. Archetypes or attitudes of the individual consciousness ceased to exist thus giving way to archetypes of the collective unconscious. By focusing the intellectual and spiritual life on visual science the 17th century left the only one refuge – the world of dreams (McLuhan, 2005: 421). In turn, the rapid increase of information exchange flows changed the concept of national community and national consciousness by turning "national languages into mass media communication or closed systems; typography provoked modern nationalism with its inherent functions of consolidation and centralization" (McLuhan, 2005: 346).

These processes had an impact on the perception of the "other" – the dissentient, different from the others. The destruction of interpersonal and intergenerational ties is leading more and more to disunity, rejection and intolerance (from religious to inter-ethnic).

Meanwhile, media technologies were rapidly developing, and another event that influenced the strengthening of fragmentary, mosaic reality was the invention of photography: "it was this paramount quality of uniformity and replication that created the Gutenberg gap between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Photography played almost the same decisive role in creating a gap between simple mechanical industrialism and the graphic era of the electronic person" (McLuhan, 2003: 216).

The emergence of mass production and the assembly line increased both disharmony of the collective nature of labor and alienation of man from the universal collective. Another important event that influenced understanding of media reality at this stage was the invention of photography. The first experiments with silver compounds and nitrates were carried out in the 17th – 18th centuries. In the 19th century, J. Niepce and L. Daguerre invented a new type of image called

the daguerreotype. S. Kracauer noted: “thinking people realized the specific character of the new expressive means perfectly when the daguerreotype appeared – they defined it unanimously as the camera’s unsurpassed ability to capture and reveal the visible (or potentially visible) physical reality” (Kracauer, 1974).

Almost simultaneously with the invention of L. Daguerre, W. Talbot announced the invention of photography to the world which at first, unlike daguerreotypes, was inferior in quality but was replicable in mass quantities. With the development of photography technologies the full similarity between the image and the object did not have the same importance as it used to be at the dawn of the photographic era. Artistic expressive means of the photograph and a photographer’s own vision of the world through the lens were recognized as more important aspects. Photography (initially as a technology and later as a new kind of art) became an impetus for further development of scientific knowledge. This was facilitated by the possibility of fixing, displaying and storing virtual images, objects and phenomena in a photo (Chelysheva, 2011).

The old reality that M. McLuhan talked about – the reality of individualism characteristic of the era of the print culture was replaced by a new – mass reality which had a significant impact on world perception as a whole: “Many representatives of the 19th century art abandoned the unique and individual “I” that used to be taken for granted in the 18th century since the personal “I” had become a heavy burden under the pressure of mass reality (McLuhan, 2005: 474).

One of the most significant events of the late 19th century is the invention of cinema. Originally born as a technical invention, cinema gradually acquired features characteristic of art – a non-traditional and technogenic art, a synthetic art which combined capabilities of traditional arts and the photograph that appeared several decades ago. The specificity of this invention consisted in the extreme realism of all what was happening on the screen.

The cinematic reality had another important distinguishing feature – it could not only be shown in various combinations (entirely, fragmentary, etc.) but also replicated in the necessary quantity. Distribution made it possible to spread the cinema reality in time and space. Despite the fact that the world of cinema was extremely close to the visible form of life and the illusion of reality became its inherent property, the cinematic reality was by no means similar. It is this division into the visible and the invisible that allows the audience not just to watch and see but also to contemplate, reflect, assume non-existent or not actually occurring events thus creating a new illusion of the illusion already created by authors and actors.

People live in a mass society. Consequently, the social origin of people is their affiliation to the mass that again comes to the fore. Mass phenomena are characteristic for production, religion and art. All features of the industrial society – synchronization, standardization, mass production and professional specialization cannot but affect a person’s perception of reality. The mass consumer society generates mass values. “The greatest discovery made by the 20th century in art and physics – a technique of weighted judgments is both a rebound and a transformation of the impersonal assembly line common in the 19th century science and art” (McLuhan 2005: 475).

Meanwhile, according to V.P. Chumakova, “the violent fragmentation of experience in the concept of M. McLuhan is connected with identity problems, identification crisis peculiar to the 20th century man: thanks to audiovisual media, a person feels “gathered into a bundle without a goal” (McLuhan, 1972: 75), in other words, he is constantly experiencing lack of a holistic picture of the world, without keeping pace with life (Chumakova, 2015).

5. Conclusion

So, intensive development of new information technologies and ubiquitous distribution of media production contribute to continuous expansion of media philosophy thus giving rise to new issues concerning understanding of media reality and how people interact with the world of mass media. Media are becoming a habitat of the human race. But “initially, the media used to have mainly instrumental status – the role of a disinterested mediator (such as a letter, telephone, radio, computer) whose task was only to communicate information without adding anything from themselves – neither their own strategy nor interests, nor a will to change the state of affairs; afterwards the situation changed drastically: the media did not only become independent but the only (let us strengthen the thesis) ontological condition of human existence” (Savchuk, 2008: 10).

The flow of media information is constantly growing: there emerge new television channels, periodicals, Internet sites. Mass media act as a filter that selects, composes and interprets information, takes on educational and educational functions, turns into some kind of “parallel

school” for the younger generation. The outcome of media development is the saturation of the spectator interests market, as a result channels differ by subject, audience, address, national, territorial, temporary and other criteria, and in other words, the influence of mass media on an individual acquires an increasingly professional character: the media affect people’s lifestyle, attitudes and values, interaction and general culture of human relationships.

Hence, analysis and understanding of the philosophical reality phenomenon legacy is a pressing issue today. Western philosophical theories about the place and role of man in the world of reality allow us to identify the main tendencies of this process in our, Russian reality.

M. McLuhan was one of the first to realize that “enlightenment is an ideal means of civil defense against the side effects of media communications. However, a Western person still has neither education nor the necessary equipment to meet new means of communication on the terms that they set for him” (McLuhan, 2003: 220).

Thus, teachers used to explain to students that media culture depends on political and economic support of the most influential forces in society. Hence, “the studies of the issues focused on a student’s personality and their life experience in the field of mass media, i.e. developing students’ media culture. According to this theory, mass media provide a potential opportunity for interaction between the media and the audiences since audiences are not just passive users: they actively perceive the information presented by mass media, independently analyze and assess it by attaching personal meanings to media texts” (Mikhaleva, 2016: 118). Consequently, the focus on protecting students from the manipulative influence of mass media and developing their critical ability became dominant in the media education policy of that period.

It is no coincidence that the heritage of M. McLuhan had a significant impact on media education development. His views on the media had something in common with the Marxist movement considering the media as an agent of social control. In this regard, he put forward the idea of forming “visual literacy” (“media literacy”) in the context of pedagogy.

Understanding M. McLuhan’s legacy is an urgent problem today. The analysis of his concept of man’s place and role in the media world has allowed us to determine the main trends of this process in the present. Blurring borders, globalization and multiculturalism associated with Internet technologies penetrating into most people’s lives, communication without language barriers direct us towards a dialogue, non-violence, tolerant attitude to each other as never before. In this respect, the opinion of V.M. Rozin seems quite fair: “only due to interaction and dialogue of different cultures, principles and characteristics of each individual culture become visible and comprehensible. Understanding of a different culture and, consequently, one’s own culture is an active attitude, not only manifestation and articulation of one’s cultural position and values but release and creation of conditions for a different cultural position of values (Rozin, 1992: 40).

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